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NOAA FISHERIES AND CALTRANS FORGE AGREEMENT TO PROTECT ENDANGERED FISH

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) and the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) have entered into a cooperative agreement detailing a number of actions that will be taken to decrease the impact of state transportation projects on federally endangered steelhead in Ventura County.

"This is a mutually beneficial agreement that will help protect endangered steelhead during construction on rivers, creeks and streams while assisting Caltrans in meeting their requirements under the Endangered Species Act (ESA)," said William Hogarth, director of NOAA Fisheries.

This accord comes as a result of an incident in August of 1999 that harmed endangered steelhead during road construction activity on Tule Creek Bridge. Construction activities began on the bridge before a biological survey was completed, which resulted in a take of Southern California steelhead, a species listed as endangered under the ESA. (The term take means "to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect, or to attempt to engage in any such conduct.")

While not conceding legal liability to the alleged take, Caltrans has fully cooperated with NOAA Fisheries in developing measures that will provide greater protections for endangered steelhead during construction projects as well as improve conditions for their safe passage in several local streams.

Caltrans has agreed to the following measures to minimize future harm and improve condition for endangered Southern California steelhead:

- NOAA Fisheries will train Caltrans' construction engineers that work in coastal districts on how to comply with the ESA.
- Caltrans will place a kiosk-style sign at two rest-stops along Highway 33, which parallels upper Sespe Creek for several miles. Each sign will contain educational information on

- endangered Southern California steelhead.
- Caltrans will repair grade control weirs downstream of the Highway 150 bridge at Santa Paula Creek that will enhance steelhead migration.
- Caltrans will set priorities for construction projects scheduled for completion 2005 so that projects that will benefit steelhead in Ventura County are first in line.

Steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) are a type of rainbow trout that migrate between fresh- and saltwater during different phases of their life-cycle. Since the 1940s, the number of adult steelhead returning to spawn in Southern California rivers and streams has plummeted from an estimated 55,000 to less than 500 fish annually. In response to their decline in the southern extent of their range, NOAA Fisheries listed steelhead in Southern California as endangered in August 1997. Pursuant to the Endangered Species Act of 1973, it is illegal to take steelhead unless authorized by NOAA Fisheries.

Steelhead inhabiting streams between the Santa Maria River (Santa Barbara County) and the Mexican border (San Diego County) represent an important component of the evolutionary legacy of the steelhead species, and thus have been grouped together into a Southern California population, or Evolutionarily Significant Unit (ESU).

NOAA Fisheries is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources through scientific research, management, enforcement, and conservation of marine mammals and other protected marine species and their habitat.

The Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), is dedicated to providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources and to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events.

The State of California, Department of Transportation (Caltrans) is responsible for the design, construction, maintenance, and operation of the California State Highway System, as well as that portion of the Interstate Highway System within the state's boundaries. In partnership with Amtrak, Caltrans also supports intercity passenger rail service in California, and is a leader in promoting the use of alternative modes of transportation. The current framework of Caltrans was implemented via Assembly Bill 69 in 1972.

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On the Internet:

NOAA - <http://www.noaa.gov>

NOAA Fisheries - <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>

Caltrans - <http://www.dot.ca.gov>